

A Fruitful or Wild French Vineyard? Distinguishing the Religious Roots of Albigenses and Waldensians in the Twelfth Century

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Abstract: *Much like how fruitful and wild branches are mixed in the same vineyard, there is a great deal of confusion when someone tries to discern the religious roots of heretical movements grown out of the Middle Ages. Two peculiar cases are often associated by confessional literature: Waldensians and Albigenses, demonized by Roman Catholic literature or romanticized by Protestant and modern Medieval fictional literature. In the quest for historical accuracy this paper intends to argue for the supremacy of certain contextual theological beliefs rather than socio-economic features alone in discerning the true nature of these movements despite their similarities and common persecution by the dominant Catholic religion. While the Albigenses reintroduced the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, the Waldensians were driven by a return to apostolic Christianity. The study also points out the need to analyze those movements beyond a one-dimensional approach in order to see the heterogeneity inside each movement, especially in their progressive evolution through time. Results point toward the need to reject an ancient origin thesis for the case of the Waldensians, whereas still allowing, in their case, a possible proto-Protestant connection.*

Keywords: Albigenses, Cathars, Middle Ages, Religious Movements, Waldensians

Introduction

Fruitful or wild vineyards may look alike on the outside but only one produces genuine fruits. In the same way, two religious movements of the Middle Ages have often suffered an unfair association among scholars, and it is time to bring such associations to a close.¹ Confessional history on the Protestant side boasted of the Albigenses as ancestors of the Reformation,² whereas on the Catholic side many described Protestantism as a

¹ Walther, “Were the Albigenses and Waldenses,” 178. See also, Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1726–27.

² Beavis, “The Cathar Mary Magdalene,” 419.

new form of the old Albigenses heresy.³ A host of contemporary fictional stories about Catharism reduced their history to a tourist ploy or as a source of revenue for many bestsellers. Scientific history and secularists, on the other hand, classified these movements as “medieval anticlerical movements” and interpreted them both as the fruit of political struggle driven mostly by economic considerations.⁴ This could not be farther from the truth.

Southern France, being the center of commercial routes, allowed new ideas to circulate, yet the nature of these movements was primarily religious. Christendom as a whole, whether among Catholic or heretical factions, during this period witnessed the spread of movements aiming at returning to apostolic simplicity. This was the case not just of the Waldensians and Albigenses but also of other movements such as: Vita Apostolica, Humiliati, Cistercians, Joachimites, Dominicans, Franciscans, Hospitallers, Fraticelli, Petrobrusians, Publicans, Beghards, Henricians, Tisserantes, Free Spirits, Hussites, Lollards, Dolcinians, Arnaldists, Patarines, Passagini, and Josephini. Given this variety of movements, there is a risk of grouping them all together despite their differences. These movements were united only in their desire to counteract the pomp and spiritual “sickness” of the corrupted religious structure of the official church during the Middle Ages. They were movements signaling a crisis in the medieval church and not necessarily a revival.⁵ But how exactly did these two movements of Waldensians and Albigenses differ from each other?

This paper shows that in discerning respectively the gnostic roots of the Albigenses and the biblical roots of the Waldensians it is of primary importance to consider the role of biblical teachings in each of them regardless of similarities or changes over time. In the pages that follow, these two religious movements will be analyzed and compared first by tracing their roots, and then by presenting a brief overview of their spread and the major events connected with them. Furthermore, the main beliefs of each group will be examined, focusing on the role of the biblical message for their faith and practice; and where opportune, a discussion on the doctrine of salvation of the specific movement will be included. Lastly, mention will be made of their respective community organization, persecution, and subsequent extinction or survival, giving some concluding thoughts on the implications of the findings.

Before analyzing the doctrinal features of each of these religious groups, it is important to make a methodological note. There are contrasting

³ Gui, “The Waldensians Heretics,” 207. See also, Vicaire, *Les Albigeois Ancetres des Protestants*, 23.

⁴ Kaelber, “Weavers into Heretics?,” 112–13.

⁵ Zeman, “Restitution and Dissent,” 7.

types of literature on the subject ranging from idealistic and at times fictional representations of the matter⁶ to condemning and denigrating depictions.⁷ Torn between these extremes, it is not always easy to distinguish their historical accuracy. This is also aggravated by the fact that dealing with clandestine groups during the Middle Ages, very little direct documentary evidence was written or survived persecution. Therefore, the majority of historical recollections end up relying on indirect and at times questionable documents from the hands of the persecutors of these groups.⁸ Reconstructions based on speculations and chronological imprecisions prevent drawing a line between history and historical fiction. For this reason, considering the specific beliefs of these groups will be of primary importance. This paper will trace the general doctrinal features of these groups and then draw some significant conclusions on the role of beliefs for the comparative study of religious movements.

The Gnostic Sect of the Albigenses

The Albigenses obtained this title due to their strong presence in the town of Albi in southern France, where they were also called Cathars (καθαρός: pure), and known as Bulgari, Bugari, or Burges in Eastern Europe. They represented the most widely distributed and most enduring heresy among the sects of the Middle Ages, as well as Europe's first and greatest counter-religion to the Roman Catholic church.⁹ The religious movement of the Albigenses had no founder. However, it is possible to trace back their origin to the Paulicians of Armenia. These were gnostic groups active in Asia Minor during the fifth century that were pushed toward Constantinople and toward the Balkans (known there as Bogomil). Much later on, in 1167, the Bogomil bishop, Nicetas, arrived in Languedoc and founded a Cathar congregation.¹⁰ From there, the heresy spread in parts of Italy, the Rhine, northern Spain, and England.

Customary relations with the East due to the First Crusade increased the number of Cathars in the West.¹¹ Midway through the twelfth century, the Albigenses were present in more than 1,000 villages and had four million Occitan adherents in southern France alone.¹² In Italy, they relied on

⁶ McCaffrey, "Imaging the Cathars," 411.

⁷ Vasilev, "Heresy and the English Reformation," 785.

⁸ Lansing, "Power and Purity," 102.

⁹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 470.

¹⁰ Barber, *The Cathars*, 181.

¹¹ Previt -Orton, *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History*, 661.

¹² Lambert, "The Cathars," 339.

independent civic authorities and informal ties; and by the end of the twelfth century, they outnumbered the Catholics in big cities, such as Milan or Florence. They were able to expand their own local communities in other areas, such as those documented in Orvieto, even sending some of their members to study at important universities.¹³ The movement was found to be attractive because of its communal living, imitating an apostolic poor and simple lifestyle. Their ideological alternative to the official social organization saw purity as the real source of power. Also, the Albigenses were characterized by a disciplined conduct that sharply contrasted with the opulence and corruption of the official church.¹⁴

The episcopal weakness of southern France, as well as the vacuum of central authorities, made the ethical appeal of the Albigenses suitable for the Languedocian noble patronage of people, such as Roger Trencaval, viscount of Béziers, and his local networks, in growing opposition to the ecclesiastical conspicuous owning of properties.¹⁵ In light of this corrupt and negligent clergy, the Albigenses rejected the established church as the “great Babylon” of Revelation with all its corruptions, rituals, and structure of powers, presenting themselves as a true spiritual alternative.

However, like the Bogomils and Paulicians, the Albigenses doctrinally professed a strict dualism, with two equal deities (a good god and an evil god) guided by principles of eternal good and evil. They considered all matter as evil, created by the evil god, Lucifer, who was given a material body after being cast out of heaven. They rejected the Hebrew Bible, baptism, the Mass, the use of any religious items, the priesthood, marriage as well as reproduction,¹⁶ and in particular the material presence of Christ in the Eucharist.¹⁷ Their denial of the real presence in the host was the core of their fiercest opposition to the religious system of the day, and it was seen by the official church as a direct, dangerous attack at the foundation of their ecclesiastical and sacramental order. The Cathars believed themselves to be the only true “church of the righteous” bearer of salvation, but at the same time, they were highly divided among themselves on doctrine with more than seventy sects.

Not all Cathars, therefore, believed the same thing, but there existed instead a wide spectrum of belief and stress on concerns that varied in time and

¹³ Miller, “Power and Purity,” 163.

¹⁴ Costen, “The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade,” 81.

¹⁵ Cannon, *History of Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 222.

¹⁶ Their numerical growth is surprising even because, given their prohibition of reproduction, it happened only through personal conversion.

¹⁷ Costen, “The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade,” 950.

place. At times, in fact, heterodox views coexisted alongside the conventional practices of the Catholic majority. The Albigenses translated the New Testament in Occitan with the addition of other writings of a gnostic nature, such as the “Gospel of the Secret Supper” and the “Book of the Two Principles.” When approaching the Bible, they believed it to be erroneous. They allegorized many biblical passages, describing the Hebrew Bible as a “demonic book of an evil god” and John the Baptist as a “major demon.” The Cathars believed that their god, married with two wives, could not be found anywhere in the material world, which was instead made by the devil, the lesser creator who stole particles of light from heaven when creating the universe.¹⁸

Being a non-Christian movement that acquired Christian coloration, Catharism as a form of medieval neo-Manichaeism¹⁹ also denied the incarnation of Christ, his death on the cross (suffered instead by the devil), as well as Christ’s eternal pre-existence and the hypostatic union, which for them was less than God. The sect was divided between *credentes* (common sympathizers) and *perfecti*, (proper members) often living in a community of goods. Even the *perfecti*,²⁰ however, were involved in manual labor in order to support themselves and the community. This venerated status of the *perfecti* was accessible through the *consolamentum*, a baptism of the Holy Spirit through the laying of hands on the head of the novices as a sign of their entrance into the community. The *consolamentum* was the only sacrament and means of salvation among the Albigenses. It gave assurance of the forgiveness of sins and restoration to the spiritual kingdom of God, but it needed to be taken under strict dietary and celibacy laws. Other rituals were added to this, such as the *benedictio panis*, the collective penance (*servici*), and the ritual of *endura*, a voluntary starvation that caused several cases of death.²¹

The use of anything material in their worship, oaths, eating of milk, meat, cheese, and eggs was condemned, as well as participation in war. This did

¹⁸ Davenport, “The Catholics, the Cathars, and the Concept of Infinity,” 267.

¹⁹ Manicheism was a syncretic dualistic philosophy taught by Mani (third century CE) that, combining elements of Christianity and Gnosticism, believed in a primordial battle between good and evil, light and dark, where all matter is evil.

²⁰ The *Perfecti* were commonly called: “bons hommes et bonnes femmes.” Inside this category there were bishops (highest degree with power of ordination), deacons (responsible of administration and discipline of the religious houses) and major and minor sons (“fils,” co-helper of bishops, the major was the successor at the bishop’s death). Apart from the *consolamentum* the *perfecti* ministered several rituals, one of them, the “adoration,” was a term used by the Inquisition to define the ritual of blessing (*melioramentum*) that the *perfecti* were ministering to the believers.

²¹ Tsiamis, et al., “The ‘Endura’ of The Cathars Heresy,” 174.

not mean complete and actual pacifism since they were sometimes willing to murder their enemies in order to preserve their secret establishment. According to the Albigenses, marriage was not only to be avoided, as well as any sexual contact, but they also believed that no one living in sexual relations could be saved.²²

Since the Albigenses believed in the reincarnation of spirits in animals, they forbade the killing of any animal, even insects.²³ After death, there was no resurrection since the doctrine of creation was denied. The body was believed to be made by the devil. At death the human spirit, in tune with medieval Neo-Platonism, went back to heaven since it originated from God.²⁴ The end of the world was conceived as the final and complete removal of beings from actual nothingness and culminated in the universal salvation of all fallen souls. From this evidence, it is possible to conclude that Catharism was outside the Christian circle and should be referred to as another religion. As their members used the Bible and assembled in fellowship, their movement was neo-pagan and theologically opposite to the fundamental beliefs of orthodox Christianity.²⁵ Cathars, for instance, placed a strong emphasis on the Gospel of John, but their religious practice clearly went against John's central teachings.

A Variety of Waldensianisms

The Waldensians, Waldenses, or Vaudois, were a different biblical sect of the Middle Ages, founded by Peter Waldo or Valdes (1140–1205), a rich unlearned merchant of Lyon in south-eastern France who, after witnessing the death of a friend, was touched by listening to a ballad on St. Alexis and its call to poverty. After he was counseled by a priest, he felt a compelling call to give his fortunes away to the poor people of Lyon. In 1173, Waldo immediately started a movement of “the poor of Lyon” (*pauperes spiritu or pauperes Christi*), characterized by itinerant preaching, translating several portions of the Bible into the vernacular, and living out the ideals of apostolic simplicity. Since Waldo was unable to read Latin, parts of the Christian Bible were commissioned and translated by one of his followers in Provençal, becoming

²² Hamilton, “The Yellow Cross,” 154.

²³ The Cathars taught that in order to regain the spiritual and angelic pure status, a believer had to renounce the material completely. Until this was achieved the soul was believed to be stuck in a cycle of reincarnation, condemned to live on the corrupt earth. See also, Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 493.

²⁴ Langermann, “Of Cathars and Creationism,” 161.

²⁵ Shriver, “A Summary of ‘Images of Catharism and the Historian's Task’,” 52.

accessible to the common people. Waldo believed that in order to be “perfect” all material benefits were to be refused *a priori*.²⁶

The intention of this movement, like many religious movements of the Middle Ages, was to restore the austere ideals of the early apostolic communities.²⁷ Some scholars have even suggested a more obscure origin²⁸ long before Waldo, hypothesizing the presence of primitive forms of *Vaudois* Christianity in the area joined later on by the followers of Waldo of Lyon in the same area.²⁹ Those ancient examples of local dissidents in the Italian valleys are said to trace back their line to the “night of time” of primitive Christianity even up to 120 CE. Their presence is said by those scholars of Protestant leaning who follow this view to have become evident only as the church of Rome was moving farther and farther away from its apostolic origins.³⁰ This “ancient origins thesis,” often instrumentally idealized by Protestants, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Adventists to prove their own standing, is today largely discounted.³¹

Rather than being related with the heresy of the Albigenses, the Waldensians were in origin much closer, and in fact gave direct influence, thirty years later to the rising Franciscan movement.³² The case of the Waldensians and Albigenses in this regard shows the impact that heretical movements had in shaping the religious practices of the medieval Catholic Church. By 1179, Waldo and his followers, at first recognizing the authority of Pope Alexander III, journeyed to Rome and appeared at the third Lateran council asking for the recognition of their “Rule.” At first, they were only considered schismatic and disobedient to authority, but not heretical. Later, under influence of the Archbishop of Lyon Jean aux Belles-Mains, the Waldensians in 1184 were expelled from Lyon and excommunicated by Pope Lucius III at the Synod of Verona with the charge of preaching as laymen without the bishop’s consent.³³

To this charge, Waldo and his followers in 1182 answered that it was “better to obey God than men” in the face of those who “want to bind the Word of God according to their personal wish.” The situation was aggravated by divisions internal to the movement. The “poor men of Lyon” rejected manual

²⁶ Tourn, *The Waldensians*, 25. On the same author: Snyder, “The Waldensians,” 396.

²⁷ Kaelber, “Other- and Inner-Worldly Asceticism,” 92.

²⁸ Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 70.

²⁹ Comba, *History of the Waldenses of Italy*, 81.

³⁰ Barnett, “Where Was Your Church before Luther?,” 21.

³¹ Stephens, “Never Failing Light. The Waldensian Story,” 235.

³² Marthaler, “Forerunners of the Franciscans: the Waldenses,” 133–42.

³³ See for example, Grant, “The Elevation of the Host,” 232.

labor but the “poor of Lombardy” instead of making vows of absolute poverty wanted to remain involved in trade.³⁴ The controversy resulted in an internal division where the Waldensians of northern Italy remained involved with manual work, without being dependent on alms.³⁵ The Spanish Waldensian Durand of Huesca (1160–1224), on the contrary, believed that preachers should leave all manual work to dedicate themselves to the meditation of Scriptures. As the movement shifted from being just a schismatic group to a heretical movement, Huesca decided to return to the Catholic church. A problem to factor in was that, in contrast to the Albigenses and other religious dissident groups like the Hussites or Lollards, the Waldensians lacked any support from lords, viscounts, or local governments.

Despite the efforts of unification with a conference in Bergamo (1218), where several issues of faith were examined by the Waldensian leadership, part of the group eventually rejoined the Catholic church. Although being historical contemporaries of the Albigenses, the Waldensians were not doctrinal sympathizers with them. On the contrary, Waldensians were untainted by Manicheanism and went a great way to dissociate from the heretical, dualist teachings of the Albigenses, according to which good and evil are juxtaposed as opposite equal forces. As a former Waldensian, Durand of Huesca wrote a treatise against the Cathars without, however, condemning the Waldensians. Waldensians were often labeled by other Inquisitors as “Donatists” because of their rejection of the validity of Catholic sacraments.

As the Waldensians were expelled from Lyon and the bloody massacres against the Albigenses approached southern France, many Waldensians fled from Provence and Languedoc to other parts of Europe, mostly to the more secure alpine regions between the Dauphiné and Piedmont. From an urban movement focused on poverty, they became a rural clandestine community increasingly opposed to the official clergy. They professed biblical literalism, believing in the supreme authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice long before the Protestant Reformation. They believed in the right of lay people to preach the gospel (*libere praedicare verbum Dei*) in their common tongue. They defended liberty of conscience, considering several traditions of the church at the time inconsistent with orthodox teachings.³⁶

In accordance with certain New Testament teachings, they denied several Catholic traditions: seven sacraments, priestly vestments, sacred images, taking of oaths, veneration of Mary or the saints, purgatory, mass for

³⁴ Brown, *Heresies*, 263.

³⁵ Brown, *Heresies*, 264.

³⁶ Walther, “A Survey of Recent Research,” 148.

the dead, indulgences, etc.³⁷ The Waldensians saw themselves as part of the universal church who had experienced divine love and grace.³⁸ They distinguished themselves from the “church of the wicked” (*ecclesia malignantium*). They were organized with the apostolic pattern of bishops-presbyters and deacons with the addition of a “majoral” super-intender, as well as other sympathizers (*amici*, “friends” or secret associates). Due to persecution, leaders were constantly moving among the religious communities, which were centered on meetinghouses (*hospitia*).³⁹ Later, leaders developed the role of barbes, a specific body of lay itinerant preachers trained to preach two-by-two across Europe.⁴⁰ Many of them could circulate through disguise as physicians or merchants.⁴¹

Some scholars suggested that the Waldensians, until the advent of Martin Luther, should not be too easily labeled as “forerunners of the Reformation,” “evangelical” or “proto-Protestant.” Contrary to the portrait of some confessional histories, Schaff notes, it is not possible to find mention of justification by faith alone (*sola Fide*) among early Waldensians, a doctrine crucial to the identity of the Protestant faith.⁴² Instead, Waldo emphasized from the beginning of his movement that faith without works is dead. Humanity, therefore, is neither justified by faith alone, nor by deeds on their own, but by faith and good works.⁴³ It is nevertheless significant that in an historical recount by Samuel Morland, mention is made of an ancient confession of faith dating to 1120. Supposedly, this creed even precedes Waldo and his profession of faith dating between 1179–1180. The intention of the creed is to go back to a primitive church pattern of poverty and defense of the faith. Articles 5 through 7 confess:

That Christ was born in the time appointed by God the Father. That is to say, in the time when all iniquity abounded, and not for the cause of good works, for all were Sinners; but that he might shew us grace and mercy, as being faithful. That Christ is our life, truth, peace, and righteousness, as also

³⁷ Cameron, “The Reformation of the Heretics,” 99.

³⁸ Cantor, *Medieval History*, 416.

³⁹ Biller, “Goodbye to Waldensianism?,” 16.

⁴⁰ Audisio and Davison “Preachers by Night,” 853. See also, “How to Detect a Clandestine Minority,” 208.

⁴¹ Wakefield, “Heretics as Physicians in the Thirteenth Century,” 328.

⁴² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 493.

⁴³ Gonnet, “The Influence of the Sermon on the Mount,” 34.

our Pastour, Advocate, Sacrifice, and Priest, who died for the salvation of all those that believe and is risen for our justification.⁴⁴

In these words, as well as from the context of the whole confession of faith, it is possible to derive a view of justification closer to the one in Protestantism than the one of Medieval Catholicism. The application of this instance on Waldensianism remains questionable also in light of Morland's use of sources written after Waldo and given other dissonant testimonies with confused dates and false quotations. In order to be saved, the Waldensian believer needed, in fact, to make a profession but also to "observe the true law of Christ."⁴⁵

It is only by the time of Oecolampadius and Bucer that by 1532, the Waldensians officially incorporated the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. Furthermore, it is important to consider the existence of doctrinal differences among streams of Waldensianism, such as leadership structure, women teaching,⁴⁶ or other issues. In addition to this, during times of harsh persecution, cases of backslidings into the Catholic church were common among Waldensians. In order to elude the Inquisition, oftentimes many made compromises, displaying a double religious commitment, being formally Catholic but secretly remaining in contact with the Waldensian clandestine community.⁴⁷

A Common Bloody Destiny

Despite their different doctrines, because of their common condemnation and refusal to submit to the established Roman Catholic Church, Albigenses and Waldensians both experienced brutal and systematic persecution. First, the Catholic Church made attempts to quell the heresy of the Albigenses through itinerant preachers sent to southern France, like Dominic of Guzman sent to combat the heresy in Languedoc around 1206.⁴⁸ Because of the little success of this strategy, Pope Innocent III launched a Crusade led by Simon de Montfort against the Albigenses (1208–1209) in order to extirpate the

⁴⁴ Morland, *The History of the Evangelical Churches*, 32–33.

⁴⁵ Cegna, "La Tradition Pénitentielle des Vaudois et des Hussites," 141.

⁴⁶ Kienzle, "Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect," 261.

⁴⁷ For example, the visit in Piedmont of the founder of Seventh-day Adventism, Ellen G. White, in 1885. See also, Conder, *The Waldensians and the Seventh-day Sabbath*, 1–4.

⁴⁸ Vicaire, *Persequutor Hereticorum*, 75.

growing threat of Catharism in southern France.⁴⁹ By 1218, the Albigenses were exterminated in southern France. The Catholic crusaders destroyed entire cities, systematically burning at the stake hundreds of Albigenses men, women, and children. Most important for the Catholics was the defeat of castle owners who had been the securest patrons, sympathizers, and defenders of the heresy.

Yet the Cathars faced death and persecution with dedication. The Synod of Toulouse of 1229 forbade the use of vernacular translations of the Bible.⁵⁰ The crusade moved from a spiritual battle into a political struggle between southern and northern France. The counteroffensive of Franciscan and Dominican friars, although successful in devastating the region of Languedoc, were not enough to break the local networks of the heresy in the region. Alarmed by the persisting force of the heresy, Gregory IX established the Inquisition by 1233, a secret ecclesiastical court that used torture, capital punishment, and criminal investigation in order to break the strong ties of the local networks of different heresies. Although experiencing some decades of revival in the fourteenth century, by 1244, during the siege of the castle of Montsegur, the movement of the Albigenses came to an end.⁵¹

Unlike Catharism, the Waldensians survived despite recurrent harsh persecution.⁵² Across the centuries, they endured trials before the Inquisition where they were burned at the stake or suffocated inside caves set on fire by their enemies.⁵³ Peter Liegé gives an account of the massacre of 1,700 Waldensians perpetrated by the troops of the Duke of Savoy, which took place during Easter week, commonly known as “Pasque Piemontesi”:

Little children were torn from the arms of their mothers, clasped by their tiny feet, and their heads dashed against the rocks; or were held between two soldiers and their quivering limbs torn up by main force. Their mangled bodies were then thrown on the highways or fields, to be devoured by beasts. The sick and the aged were burned alive in their dwellings. Some had their hands and arms and legs lopped off, and fire applied to the severed parts to staunch the bleeding and prolong their suffering. Some were flayed alive, some were roasted alive, some disemboweled; or tied to trees in their own orchards, and their hearts cut out. Some were horribly mutilated, and of others the brains were boiled and eaten by these cannibals. Some were

⁴⁹ Hamilton, “The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade,” 610.

⁵⁰ Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, 223–24.

⁵¹ The last four *perfecti* were burned at Carcassonne on September 8, 1319.

⁵² Ward, “The Waldensian Story,” 123.

⁵³ Deane, “Archiepiscopal Inquisitions in the Middle Rhine,” 197.

fastened down into the furrows of their own fields, and ploughed into the soil as men plough manure into it. Others were buried alive. Fathers were marched to death with the heads of their sons suspended round their necks. Parents were compelled to look on while their children were first outraged [raped], then massacred, before being themselves permitted to die.⁵⁴

The slaughter became infamous through the British poet, John Milton, who, with the sympathy of Oliver Cromwell, penned his famous sonnet “On the Late Massacre in Piedmont.”⁵⁵ Under this context of geographical and cultural isolation, risking genocide, the Waldensians saw the advent of Protestantism as a necessary lifeboat. Already, by the Synod of Chanforan (1532), the *barbes* conferred in the Angrogna Valley with the Swiss Reformers led by William Farel and issued a new Confession of Faith, openly embracing the Reformed Protestant faith.⁵⁶ Waldensians gradually changed from being a rural movement of dissidents into becoming a Genevan-style reformed church.⁵⁷

Such change seems unexpected since the earlier Waldensian movement was closer to Anabaptism.⁵⁸ Waldensian theology, like the Czech Brethren, Taborites or Bohemian Brethren, was much more focused on the New Testament teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁹ This theological shift was also surprising in light of the existing connection between Waldensians and Hussites already established by the fifteenth century.⁶⁰

The acceptance of the Protestant Reformation involved the implementation of a number of significant changes in their beliefs, practices, and organization. For example, the Waldensians abandoned their original pacifist tendencies and decided to view war as a legitimate form of defense under the Cattaneo’s crusade of 1488 under the leadership of Henri Arnaud (1641–1721). Among other significant and lasting changes, the Waldensians also changed their attitude toward public and ecclesiastical authorities. The itinerant preachers (*Barba*) were sent directly to study theology in Geneva, resulting in the adoption of Calvinist theology.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Wylie, *History of the Waldenses*, 132.

⁵⁵ Accardy, “Calvin’s ministry to the Waldensians,” 45.

⁵⁶ Ferrario, “The Peaks and Valleys of the Waldensian Church,” 53.

⁵⁷ Muston, *The Israel of the Alps*, 93.

⁵⁸ DeWind, “‘Anabaptism’ and Italy,” 20.

⁵⁹ Lochman, “Not Just One Reformation,” 218.

⁶⁰ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 38.

⁶¹ Treesh “The Waldensian Recourse to Violence,” 294.

Embracing the Reformation meant the increase of persecutions from the Catholic church, culminating in the joint effort between the King of France Louis XIV and Duke Amedeo II of Savoy to wipe them out in 1686, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. During this period even some French Protestant Huguenots sought refuge in the Waldensian Valleys. Even the Waldensians themselves were later on forced to migrate to Switzerland. After such exile, in 1689, Arnaud led a “glorious return” to their homeland, making their survival possible. In that occasion the Waldensians held off a French regiment in what today is known as the battle of Salbertrand.⁶²

The Waldensians Today

Only after the late nineteenth century, Waldensians living in the valleys of Piedmont started to enjoy relative religious and political freedom, first under Napoleon then with the Risorgimento, joining the unification process and supporting Count Cavour’s unsuccessful effort to promote a “free church in a free state” for the Italian peninsula.⁶³ Although full separation between church and state in Italy still remains fictitious today, their emancipation became apparent with the “Patenti Letters” enacted by King Alberto of Savoy on April 17, 1848. After centuries of isolation, not being allowed to leave their area, Waldensians were allowed to cross their borders and started to become active in Italian society.⁶⁴

However, their struggle for freedom continued during the time of Italian fascism.⁶⁵ As the Catholic Church signed the Concordat with the fascist regime (1929), Waldensians instead took weapons during the resistance movement in 1943–1945.⁶⁶ The Waldensians are a rare case of survival representing 10% of the Protestant Italian community today,⁶⁷ and in other parts of the world.⁶⁸ Their church polity today is a mixture between Presbyterian and Congregationalist with an elected executive committee (“Tavola Valdese”).⁶⁹

In recent times, under a climate of granted religious freedom, the Waldensian movement has embraced more pluralistic ecumenical ideas. In

⁶² Cunsolo, “You are My Witnesses,” 116.

⁶³ Homer, “Seeking Primitive Christianity,” 12.

⁶⁴ Brauer, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, 854–55.

⁶⁵ Rochat, “Le Valli valdesi nel regime fascista: appunti sul controllo poliziesco,” 3.

⁶⁶ Bowden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 1222–23.

⁶⁷ Root, “The Waldensians,” 1105.

⁶⁸ Vinay, “Storia dei Valdesi III,” 670.

⁶⁹ Fahlbusch et al., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 702–5.

terms of practical theology, they became closer to the “Social Gospel” and to various aspects of public opinion (euthanasia, remarriage, etc.) that in some Protestant circles are considered forms of liberal theology.⁷⁰ The Waldensians also established a theological school now located in Rome, as well as a publishing house where they are involved in an inter-religious dialogue with Methodist and Baptist churches.

Conclusions

Having examined these two dissident movements evolving out of the Middle Ages, it is possible to reach some conclusions. First of all, the field of studies of religious movements requires the recourse to an objective methodological approach that has not always been pursued in the past. Analyzing the specific beliefs of these religious groups requires necessary distinctions to be made and to avoid the generalizations found in existing literature. Despite their apparent commonalities, the “branches” of the Albigenses and Waldensians originated from very different and incompatible roots: Gnosticism versus a focus on poverty. Both groups claimed very ancient origins in their roots that date back to the first centuries of Christianity, yet, it is an error to contemplate an “ancient origin thesis” for the Waldensians, a theory abandoned today by much of the literature.

This becomes particularly relevant when considering the documentary evidence for the doctrine of justification among the Waldensians. It should not come as a surprise that not every aspect of the doctrine was present in the Waldensian pre-Reformation period as even the official church for centuries did not have a clear and uniform position on justification. But this, however, should not lead any competent scholar to simply reject the essence of a possible form of partial proto-Protestantism in Waldensianism. A similar case should be made for those pre-Reformation analogies to Waldensianism that are traceable among the Lollards of John Wycliffe or the Hussites of John Hus. This research indeed warns about the twofold risk of considering the Albigenses as a Christian movement and on the other hand inappropriately rejecting the Waldensians as a heretical movement alien to ancient Christianity.

For both the Waldensians and Albigenses, their roots are not always traceable and easy to distinguish. Nevertheless, the desire to imitate primitive Christianity is still traceable in both, at least outwardly. This study shows that religious beliefs operate as a test for whether a specific religious movement

⁷⁰ Cottin, “The Evolution of Practical Theology,” 131.

should be considered a part of Christianity proper. This paper pointed out how Waldensianism, in its first formulations, can only in part be considered a form of proto-Protestantism, whereas it should be rightly recognized as proto-Franciscan for its vows of poverty.⁷¹ This correlates with the necessity to consider the impact that institutional factors had both for heterodox and orthodox religious movements in shaping and transforming their nature over time. It is therefore useful to speak of a plurality of Waldensianisms, from its Catholic beginning, through an almost Anabaptist season, then to a Calvinist Reformed church polity, and finally the ecumenical tendencies of today. Future research should try to examine more in detail the doctrine of salvation among Waldensians prior to the Reformation as well as trying to analyze the collateral effects of heresy in shaping the practices of the orthodox church. This has implications even in how one should properly make sense of one's own ministry setting in the fragmented church settings of today. Religious movements must be seen more as evolving through time and less for what they might have in common on the surface. Specific core beliefs have far deeper ramifications pastorally than the mere social settings. Such a study becomes crucial also when applied to the history of other religious movements, as well as in today's returning clash of worldviews between the Eastern and Western world.

Finally, this research also pointed out how both dissident groups underwent the major "pruning" of violent persecution. From a contemporary perspective, regardless of their differences, they were almost exterminated during the Middle Ages. Yet, it is important to take into account the time and culture of religious conformity, which was the foundation for the entire society of the Middle Ages. Despite the total absence of any diplomatic support, the Waldensians, however much they differed from the Albigenses, miraculously survived centuries of "pruning" persecution until they finally gained their freedom of religion just over a century ago.

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⁷¹ González, ed. *The Story of Christianity*, 358.

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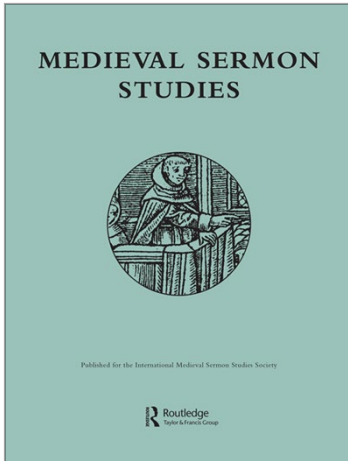
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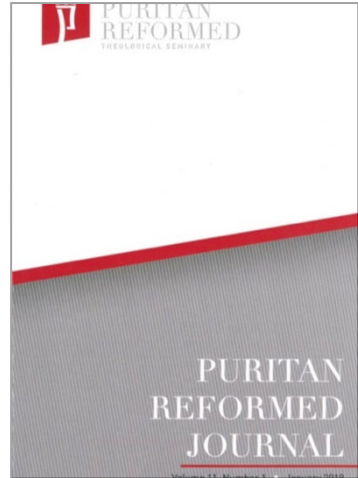
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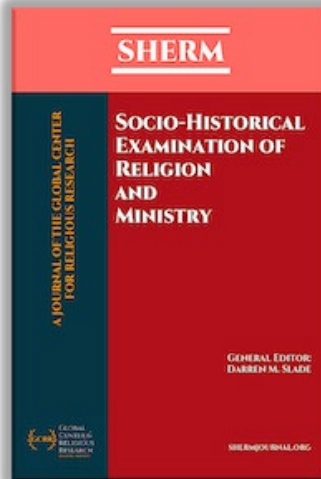
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